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## Instructional Considerations for English Language Learners

English language learners (ELL) make up one of the fastest growing groups of students in the United States. Often, teachers ask how response to intervention (RTI) can be used with ELL students. Emerging research has shown that RTI practices have been helpful for ELL students (Haager, 2007). Despite this evidence, there are a number of considerations teachers need to know before using RTI with ELL students. Consider the following example.

*Nadia*

*Nadia is a third grader. She moved to the U.S. from Russia with her family 1 year ago. While in Russia, Nadia attended school intermittently, depending on whether her family needed her to watch her younger siblings. Once she was in the U.S., Nadia enrolled in the second grade and participated in additional English instruction for 30 minutes per day. During her time in Russia, and continuing into the family's migration to the U.S., Nadia's family spoke only Russian at home. By the end of second grade, Nadia's English had improved, however, her overall school achievement was well below the second grade expectations. At the beginning of third grade, Nadia's teacher was very concerned about her school achievement and asked to meet with the school's intervention team to make a referral to special education. The team leader set up a meeting, and explained to the teacher that the team would consider what types of interventions might work for Nadia, noting that a referral to special education might not be the best solution.*

Nadia's situation exemplifies the difficulties faced by children who are learning English as a second language. They are expected to attend school and make progress, but they may not have much prior exposure to English and school may be the only place in their daily lives where English skills are needed. Despite this reality, national and state education policies emphasize and/or require students to master English, and ELL students are often required to participate in English-only instruction and assessment. In addition, there are a wide variety of ELL instructional practices in use in U.S. schools and not all of these practices are grounded in research. How can you help your ELL students be successful?

*Learning English is Important*

Learning English is important for students in the U.S. as well as in other countries. English is the most widely used language in the U.S. and it is an important language for business and culture in other parts of the world as well. In some countries outside of the U.S., learning English is required of students

as a second or third language. In the U.S., second language instruction is not universal, but it is important for all students to learn English to a basic level of competency. One of the most important things for everyone to remember about learning English (or any second language) is that it takes time. In addition, there are developmental steps in second language learning that have a big effect on how well your students can use the language for school tasks. One of the best descriptions of the steps involved in language learning was provided by Jim Cummins in 1981. He noted that there are two major components to language learning; he called these BICS and CALP (Cummins, 1981).

*BICS: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills.* BICS include the most basic language skills that allow a student to communicate with others orally. BICS include knowing the names of important nouns and a few phrases that can be used to express basic needs such as “can I go to the bathroom?” BICS typically develop before other language skills and are very important for daily functioning. Most of the time, BICS can develop in oral form in a matter of a few days or weeks in a setting where the second language is used regularly. Often, your students will learn BICS skills in English from their classmates as well as from interactions with you and other adults. It is estimated that children can master BICS in about 1-2 years of exposure to English at school. Importantly, such learning covers very basic English only and does not include the skills necessary to use English for writing or other school assignments.

*CALP: Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.* By comparison, CALP skills include advanced language skills necessary for thinking, writing, and working in a second language. CALP skills include learning the details of the language’s spelling, grammar, vocabulary usage, and advanced vocabulary terms. CALP skills are essential for higher level success in school, especially at the secondary and post-secondary level. Because CALP includes mastery of far more language information, it takes much longer to develop. If your ELL students receive regular English instruction as part of their daily school activities, they are likely to develop CALP in 5-7 years. Mastery of CALP requires daily instruction in all elements of English as well as ongoing opportunities to use English as part of school and extra-curricular activities.

#### *Time is of the Essence*

It is obvious from the above descriptions that learning English as a second language is a time-consuming process. Your students who start school already fluent in English have had about 5 years of learning and practice in mastering this language. Your students who come to school and do not yet know

English, or don't know it very well, are at a significant disadvantage from the native English speakers. The reality of learning any language is that it takes time. If your students start out knowing English, the focus of instruction can be exclusively on other things. But if your students come to school not proficient in English, and all instruction is given in English, they will need time to learn English in order to use it in school and elsewhere. One of the major challenges that you and your ELL students face is how to find time to include English instruction in the already full school schedule. This is a double-bind because, for any other instruction to be effective, your students must have the chance to learn the language(s) used in the school. For this reason, finding ways to help your ELL students learn English as well as other subjects is very important.

### *RTI and ELL*

The good news is that effective ELL instruction fits with RTI very well. RTI practices can be used to teach and support your ELL students in the same ways that they can be used with all your students. The remainder of this chapter will provide information about the benefits of using RTI to help ELL students from diverse cultures and language backgrounds. As will be explained, RTI and ELL are really a perfect match because RTI is language and culture neutral, it allows individualization of language instruction, and RTI puts the focus on what your English learners can do, not what they cannot do.

### *RTI is Language and Culture Neutral*

One of the features of RTI that makes it ideal for use with ELL students is that it is language and culture neutral. RTI is basically a procedural scaffold for helping your students meet specific goals. It can be used with any goal. That means it can be used in any language, with any culture, and with any set of learning expectations. All cultures around the world have some form of expectations for their young. Such expectations shape the methods used for child rearing, informal and formal education, and transitional supports provided to children as they become adults. RTI includes identifying, monitoring, and adjusting the processes used to support a society's children as they mature. For this reason, it does not depend on any particular language, set of learning expectations, or values.

The neutral aspect of RTI is important to consider when using it with your students from diverse language and cultural backgrounds. Not all cultures will have exactly the same expectations of their children. For this reason there are differences in the learning expectations of children in different parts of

the world as well as in different regions of the U.S. Even though all U.S. states now have explicit learning standards, these are not identical in all 50 states. Importantly, these standards may not be accepted by those who send their children to your school. For this reason, an important first step in using RTI with children from diverse backgrounds is to discuss with their parents and other family members what your state's learning expectations (e.g., standards) are. Most parents who have chosen to enroll their children in a public school want them to be successful there. Often, for ELL students learning and using English for reading, writing, and other activities is a major goal of school attendance. Some of your students' families may not agree with the state's standards and other school options exist. While there are mandatory school attendance laws in all 50 U.S. states, parents are allowed to use private, parochial, and home school options to meet these laws.

After discussing your state and/or school learning standards with your students' families, it is important to consider how these standards fit with the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of your school's community. Often, there are unique values or goals for children in specific communities that are above and beyond what your state or school require. Sometimes, parents are interested in ensuring that these values are not ignored or discriminated against at school. For some families, maintaining the child's first language is an important learning goal. Usually, this goes above and beyond your school's standards, but it is important for you and other school personnel to know whether the community expects ELL students to maintain their first language while they learn English, or if English will become the primary language.

Within RTI practices, there is no "rule" or mandate that instruction be only in English or that U.S. values be exclusive. RTI calls for identifying a student's beginning (e.g., baseline) skills, choosing an intervention (e.g., instructional plan) and implementing it, and monitoring progress to see if the instruction is working. RTI can be used with any goal, in any language, for any set of values or learning standards. RTI *does* require that there be agreement among the participants about the specific goal(s), intervention, and progress measure. You play a critical role in making this agreement happen. Once such agreement is reached, RTI practices can be used to support all your students, including those who are learning English. Given that the goal for most children who are learning English is to master English, using RTI to support this learning is a very effective practice.

*RTI Focuses on What ELL Students Can Do*

One of the reasons that RTI is effective for supporting ELL students is that it focuses on what your students *CAN* do, and not on what they cannot do. For example, within an RTI framework, all your students, including ELL students, participate in universal benchmark screenings three times a year. These screenings provide data which show how each of your students is doing in relation to the school's and state's learning standards. The benchmark data are used as part of the process to identify which of your students need additional help to meet the learning goals. Your students who are still learning English are likely to perform below the benchmark goal on the universal screenings. This is because such screenings are usually conducted in English. It is appropriate to include your ELL students in the screenings because otherwise it would be hard to know whether they have met the goal yet. But, it is also important to recognize that your students who are still learning English will need additional instruction in English as well as the skills included in the learning standard.

*RTI Allows Individualization of Language Instruction*

The major benefit of RTI practices for ELL students is that it allows for you to individualize instruction on the basis of students' needs. Consider this: your students are likely to come to school with diverse backgrounds in a number of school topics (e.g., dinosaurs or art). Those who are learning English will have different levels of English proficiency when they begin each school year. For this reason, it is important to gather baseline data on your ELL students' English skills so that the right English instruction can be provided. But, sometimes, it is also crucial to gather data concerning your students' first language skills. This is because knowing about how the student is doing in both languages will help you to design the best instruction for the student. A very helpful resource concerning instructional support for ELL students is available from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES). This publication is entitled *Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for Students in the Elementary Grades* (Gersten, Baker, Shanahan, Linan-Thompson, Collins, & Scarcella, 2007).

The IES document provides a synthesis of research concerning how best to help your ELL students. It offers five main suggestions to support all students who are learning English:

1. Screen for reading progress and monitor progress
2. Provide intensive small-group reading intervention

3. Provide extensive and varied vocabulary instruction
4. Develop academic English
5. Schedule peer-assisted regular learning opportunities

The above five core recommendations for ELL students incorporate a number of basic RTI practices. For example, the first recommendation calls for screening all ELL students and monitoring their progress in learning to read English. The second recommendation is to use small group instruction to support ELL students in developing English reading skills. The other three recommendations all fit RTI instructional practices for students participating in tier 2 and tier 3 activities. In general, the big idea for helping your ELL students is to use RTI practices to provide the instruction they need to learn English as well as other skills.

#### *General Guidelines*

In order to help ELL students be successful, you can use specific practices that incorporate RTI activities. One of the core underpinnings of effective instruction for your ELL students is to recognize they will need English instruction alongside other instruction. As noted above, providing English instruction in addition to the regular lessons will take additional time, and adjustments to the your students' schedules may be needed. There are six main things that you can do to help provide the most effective programs for ELL students; these steps are:

1. Screen students to identify their language development in both English and the first language;
2. Provide English instruction as well as other skills instruction;
3. Monitor the students' progress in both English as well as skills learning;
4. Adapt English instruction first to see if that helps;
5. Adapt skills instruction second;
6. Consider learning difficulties in both languages.

In past years, many ELL students were often thought to have a learning disability when they had difficulties in school. Over time, it has become clear that for many of these students, the problem is that they are still learning English and they *do not* have a learning disability. The above six steps are designed to ensure that your ELL students are provided with effective English instruction as part of their school programs so that they have the greatest chance of meeting the learning standards.

The above steps utilize RTI methods in that they include universal screening, specific instruction, progress monitoring, and program review as part of both English as well as content instruction. When you use such steps, it is possible to identify whether an English language learner makes effective progress with specific instruction. Importantly, these steps are set up so that your ELL student(s) would be considered for referral to special education *only* if she does not make progress with high quality instruction in English and content areas. Basically, you can use RTI to test the hypothesis that your student would benefit from targeted English instruction in order to be successful in school. If your student makes effective progress with the combined ELL and content instruction, then success is found. If your student does not show progress after the use of specific English and content area instruction, then the consideration of a learning disability is appropriate.

*Screen Students.* In order to know what type of instruction your students need, some type of screening assessment must be conducted. Your ELL students should participate in the school-wide RTI screenings just like all students will. The difference for your ELL students is that they should participate in a second language skills screening as well. This second screening will provide information about general language development and what type and level of English instruction is needed. There are published materials which have been developed to screen ELL students as part of overall RTI activities, however, such resources are generally available in a limited number of other languages. Spanish is fast becoming the second most used language in the U.S. For this reason, several publishers have Spanish versions of commonly used screening assessments. Both the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and AIMSweb reading assessments are available in Spanish. If your ELL students speak Spanish, either DIBELS or AIMSweb materials can be used for screening them.

The Spanish DIBELS is known as *Indicadores Dinámicos del Éxito en la Lectura* (IDEL) and these can be downloaded for free at the DIBELS website (<http://dibels.uoregon.edu>). The Spanish AIMSweb reading assessment program is available for purchase from the AIMSweb website (<http://www.aimsweb.com>). These Spanish screening materials offer a way to compare students' progress in English and Spanish language and reading development. This is important because there are patterns in how students develop proficiency in first and second languages. Plus, by having screening data for both languages, you can know what types of instruction are needed in both English and other skills.



At this time, published screening materials are widely available in only English and Spanish. Educators have created translations of certain assessments, such as the DIBELS, in other languages for research or small-scale applications. If you have ELL students who speak a language other than Spanish, the best this for you to do is to work with the ELL teachers in your district to locate the appropriate materials. It's possible to create translations of these assessments into other languages and this is another way to obtain appropriate screening materials. Importantly, the translation, use, and interpretation of any assessment must be done only by those who are absolutely fluent in the desired language as well as English.

*Provide Instruction.* Once screening data have been gathered from ELL students, the next step is to provide instruction. Just like with other applications of RTI, reviewing screening data for your ELL students involves looking for the skills the students have mastered and figuring out what they need to learn next. Also similar to other RTI practices, your ELL students should be organized into small instructional groups that will work on targeted English development skills. Such groups should include 4-6 students and the group's instructional goals should be clearly identified. Once your instructional plan is developed, an appropriate progress measure should be identified.

*Monitor Progress.* For your students who are at the very early stages of learning English, the DIBELS or AIMSweb Test of Early Literacy (TEL) are very good progress measures to use. These measures provide indications of specific English language and reading skill development. For more advanced English language learners, other assessments which measure advanced applications of English such as grammar and complex reading comprehension could be used. As with other uses of RTI, your ELL students should be progress monitored weekly. Such monitoring will offer information about the effectiveness of the English instruction and whether your students' program needs to be changed. A complete description of progress monitoring procedures is included in chapter 4 of this book. In general, progress data need to be collected for a minimum of at least 3 data points before your student's progress can be reviewed. ELL students should have the opportunity to learn from at least two distinct English language curricula before a decision is made to consider other reasons for school difficulties such as a learning disability.

*Adapt English Instruction.* If your student's progress data indicates that she is not making desired progress in learning English skills, the next best step is to adapt the English instruction. Changing her English instruction first follows from the general idea of testing the hypothesis that ELL students must first learn English in order to be successful in U.S. schools. By changing the English instruction, you can identify whether different ELL instruction helps her in both English and the content areas. It's a good idea to pay attention to how all your ELL students are doing on a regular basis. By reviewing data from all your students who receive ELL instruction, it's possible to identify how effective the ELL instructional program is as a whole. If only one or two of your ELL students are struggling, it makes sense to change their programs only. But, if all your ELL students are not doing well, it makes sense to review the ELL curriculum and determine whether it is the most effective available. The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC, 2008) has reviews of ELL curricula and these can provide information for programs that your school is considering.

#### *Adapt Skill Instruction*

If changes in the English instruction do not lead to improvements in your student's school progress, then it is time to modify the content area instruction. Changes in instruction in areas like math, science, or social studies, allow you to use basic RTI steps to help your student. As with other uses of RTI, your changes could include increasing the duration, frequency, or group size for a specific skill area. Your student's progress in learning the skill needs to be monitored with a measure matched to the skill being taught. If your instructional changes result in your student showing improved performance in that skill area, then it will be clear that she needed different content area instruction. If your student still does not make satisfactory progress, then it may be an indication that she has a more chronic difficulty such as a learning disability.

*Consider Referral.* If your ELL student does not begin to make progress toward improved English and content area skills once RTI practices are put in place, it may be appropriate for you to consider a referral for either a comprehensive language assessment or for special education. Consideration of such referrals should occur only AFTER you have followed the above steps with integrity. This means that the selected ELL and content area instruction must be used exactly as designed, and that regular progress data must be collected. If, *and only if*, accurately implemented instruction with accurate progress data

indicate that your student has not responded to the interventions, then your RTI team can consider the possibility that your student may need to be referred for a comprehensive evaluation.

There are two types of comprehensive evaluations that may be helpful for your ELL students who have not responded to interventions. The first type is a comprehensive language evaluation. This type of assessment is typically conducted by a speech and language pathologist, ideally one who is bilingual in English and the same language as the student. If it's not clear what your student's overall language skills are in English and the first language, a comprehensive language evaluation should be done. This evaluation will provide information concerning whether there is a language development problem in one or both languages. If your student's general language skills are known, then a comprehensive psychological evaluation can be conducted.

The psychological evaluation process relies upon language skills for certain aspects of assessment. For this reason, it is unlikely to be helpful if your student's language skills are not well developed enough to participate in the evaluation. Your RTI team will want to look closely at the data and think about whether there is enough information about the student's overall English skills and language development for a psychological evaluation to be useful. If your student's language skills are not known, then a language evaluation will be much more useful. In order for either type of comprehensive evaluation to be helpful, there must be clarity about the student's current language skills. In general, the most helpful information to support students who are learning English will come from data collected during instructional activities. For this reason, the best use of the RTI team's effort is in selecting, using, and reviewing scientifically-based English language teaching programs. As a classroom teacher, you can support them in using effective English teaching programs.

#### Applications and Summary

If we return to the case of Nadia, we can apply the information included in this chapter about how best to support ELL students. In Nadia's case, the case manager was right to suggest that a referral might not be the best next step. Here is how Nadia's situation unfolded.

*Nadia's teacher participated in a school-wide RTI team meeting at which data from her school progress during the first 6 months of the year was discussed. The teacher shared that Nadia had participated enthusiastically in all lessons, but she did very poorly on all the chapter tests. Her teacher*

*noted that Nadia seemed to get along very well with her classmates and that she talked often with the other students during class activities and on the playground.*

*The RTI team identified several parts of Nadia's situation that could affect her school progress. They noted that she had been exposed to English for a very limited period of time, and only at school or other events with school friends. In addition, they pointed out that she appeared to be on track for developing BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) with her peers, but that she had not yet had enough time to develop the CALP skills needed for school assignments, especially written work. The team asked the teacher what type of English language instruction Nadia received, and the teacher reported that she did not know because the ELL teacher pulled the students during the Language Arts block.*

*Together with Nadia's teacher, the team decided they needed more information about Nadia's school performance and English development. They decided to do the following:*

- 1. The teacher contacted the ELL specialist and asked for a description of the ELL lessons as well as information about Nadia's Russian skills. The ELL teacher reported that despite her limited formal schooling, Nadia's Russian was quite good. She described the ELL instruction program and noted the importance of the students learning the English letters and phonemes.*
- 2. Together with the ELL teacher, they chose to monitor Nadia's English progress using the DIBELS Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) measures on a weekly basis. Since Nadia's BICS skills were developing strongly, the ELL teacher suggested that the classroom teacher conduct the weekly NWF assessments so that she could see how Nadia progresses.*
- 3. The two teachers agreed that Nadia would attend ELL sessions during science lesson time instead of during language arts; this would ensure that she did not miss the chance to benefit from the classroom-based English instruction.*
- 4. The team decided to review Nadia's progress after 3 weeks and determine whether the planned activities were helpful.*

5. *At the 3-week review, the teacher was pleased to report that Nadia was making stronger progress in learning English as seen in her weekly NWF scores. In addition, she had shown gains in other classroom activities, including written assignments.*

In Nadia's case, a referral for special education did not turn out to be the best thing to do next. Instead, the team used the RTI process to develop a plan to support Nadia with targeted instruction and weekly progress monitoring. Had Nadia been referred, she might have participated in an evaluation which could have been very inaccurate due to her new and emerging English skills. Instead, she was given English instruction that had a benefit on her language and content area skills.

This chapter has provided information about how RTI can be used to support students who are learning English. RTI is very well matched to the needs of ELL students because it allows teachers and the specialists who work with them to implement specific English language instruction and to monitor student progress. Given the growth of Spanish-speaking ELL students in the U.S., Spanish assessment and instructional materials have been developed to assist with RTI practices. These materials allow teachers to screen, monitor, and review student progress in the development of both English and Spanish. Since many U.S. students speak languages other than Spanish, additional materials for more diverse language need to be developed. Luckily, RTI practices are language neutral and can be used to support all ELL students.

## Resources for Supporting English Language Learners

*AIMSweb Spanish Version:* AIMSweb offers Spanish versions of its reading assessments. These can be purchased for classroom use.

Website: <http://www.edformation.com/measures/s-reading/>

*Fostering Academic Success for English Language Learners: What Do We Know?* by Robert Liguanti.

This document is found at the WESTED website. WESTED is a nonprofit research, development, and service agency, WestEd enhances and increases education and human development within schools, families, and communities.

Website: <http://www.wested.org/policy/pubs/fostering/>

*Indicadores Dinámicos del Éxito en la Lectura (IDEL):* The Spanish version of DIBELS provides an easy way to measure Spanish speaking ELL students' progress in learning to read in both Spanish and English.

Website: <http://dibels.uoregon.edu/>

*Teaching Literacy in English to K-5 English Learners* is a website run by the U.S. Department of Education's Doing What Works clearinghouse. This site provides videos, slideshows, and tools for teaching reading to K-5 English learners. The site is based on five research-based recommendations: screen and monitor students' progress; provide small-group reading interventions; provide vocabulary instruction throughout the day; develop academic English competence beginning in primary grades; and schedule regular peer-assisted learning opportunities, including structured language practice.

Website: [http://dww.ed.gov/priority\\_area/priority\\_landing.cfm?PA\\_ID](http://dww.ed.gov/priority_area/priority_landing.cfm?PA_ID)

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